The objectives of this project were to review the current trends of social media (SM) participation within the pharmaceutical industry, and to evaluate the quality of various online medical social media (MRSM) websites. The potential roles and responsibilities that the Medical Affairs (MA) departments within the industry may play in MRSM websites will be assessed.

BACKGROUND

The term SM can be defined in many ways. For the purposes of this research, MRSM is defined as an umbrella term that describes the sharing and dissemination of various forms of drug and disease state information using web-based applications (e.g., sites, blogs, etc.), which allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content.

Despite the rapidly evolving introduction of SM within the healthcare industry, many pharmaceutical companies are slow in their approach as a result of the current absence of evidence-based guidance from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

With recent advances in technology, internet users are able to take advantage of social networks, blogs, and other SM to gather healthcare information and share their experiences with other users.

According to a 2009 survey by the Pew Research Center, 83% of American adults (83% of Internet users) now seek online health information.

The abundance of readily available health-related information on the internet has initiated discussions regarding the validity and accuracy of the information presented on MRSM websites.

Research by Pharma Marketing News and Pharma Marketing Blog revealed that pharmaceutical companies have a presence in 55 Twitter® accounts, 45 Facebook® sites, 35 YouTube® sites, 31 brand-sponsored medicinal websites, and 18 blogs.

The precise role of the MA department within the pharmaceutical industry in this area of communication has yet to be determined.

METHODS

A comprehensive, electronic survey using Survey Monkey® was developed for end-users (patients, HCWs, and industry representatives) of MRSM websites. After contacting over 100 MRSM websites (non-brand and brand-related), Google groups, and Yahoo groups, a total of 20 administrators consented to disseminating our survey on their websites between January 21, 2011 and February 14, 2011. Administrators of these sites were also allowed to post the questionnaire on other portals where their users may find the survey.

The survey was designed from a healthcare professional's perspective, which may have resulted in suboptimal accuracy and results if used by non-MA professionals. There is a potential for MA to provide medical support within a large multidisciplinary team. As MRSM sites emerge and progress further, the role of MA is expected to increase.

The survey was accepted by over 100 patients, healthcare professionals, and industry representatives and provides qualitative insight into the use and evolution of MRSM websites in the future. All respondents that completed the survey.

The high participation rate among patients was likely due to increased exposure of the survey in patient communities; in addition, the high participation among healthcare providers might suggest that they are becoming more engaged in online patient communities and are increasingly using MRSM websites for educational purposes.

The primary reason for browsing or searching for MRSM websites was to research disease and drug information. In the context of the open-ended question asking participants to list additional reasons for visiting MRSM websites.

The survey results indicate that MRSM websites contain several features and functionalities, which may have led to potential bias in the information.

In evaluating the features that are present or will be present on MRSM websites, advertisers need to be aware of the issues that hinder end-users from accepting MRSM websites as credible sources of information and support.

Mixed responses to the pharmaceutical industry’s transition into the social networking arena emphasizes the uncertainty surrounding the validity and trustworthiness of claims made by websites. It is also important to note that more than 31% and 27% of patients and HCWs, respectively, believe that the pharmaceutical industry should not be involved in social media sites, whereas the majority of patients, HCWs, and industry employees believe that the pharmaceutical industry’s transition into social networking is slow and adequately progressing.

The impact of MRSM websites on the pharmaceutical industry has been slow and gradual. Therefore, the MA department plays a significant role in ensuring drug information is accurate and balanced. There is a potential for MA to provide medical support within a large multidisciplinary team. As MRSM sites emerge and progress further, the role of MA may become more defined.

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